

Blasphemy was a special case, however, for in general Cromwell's purpose was not to put down harmless pleasures but to remove occasions for debauchery — and to discourage men from making a god of mere mindless amusements. If his code was austere, it was because he took too high a view of human nature, not too low a one. 'Truly', he said, 'these things do respect the souls of men, and the spirits, which *are* the men. The mind is the man. If that be kept pure, a man signifies somewhat; if not, I would very fain see what difference there is betwixt him and a beast'.

He would never admit that there need be any conflict between what he called the interest of the nation, meaning the civil liberty of the people as a whole, and the special interest of the people of God. He said 'if anyone whatsoever think the interest of Christians and the interest of the nation inconsistent, I wish my soul may never enter into his or their secrets'; and again, 'he sings sweetly that sings a song of reconciliation betwixt these two interests, and it is a pitiful fancy, and wild and ignorant, to think they are inconsistent'.

But the will of the broad political nation remained obstinately at odds with the interest of the people of God. The average M.P. heartily distrusted liberty of conscience, especially when it was extended to the humble congregations of the sects. He did not much share Cromwell's humane horror that men were hanged for trifles, and he was apt to see the much needed reform of the law as a threat to his property. He was cool towards a reformation of manners, especially when it meant upstart Major-Generals telling justices of the peace how to go about their business. And the constant stress on godliness became oppressive; there would have been many to echo Edmund Chillenden's exasperated cry, in the midst of the 1656 elections, 'Pish, let religion alone; give me my small liberty'.

Most Englishmen, then as now, felt more comfortable with low-temperature men at the helm, and after the Restoration they got them. Not that they gained much in liberty, what with the Clarendon Code, the Licensing Act, the Law of Settlement and the rest. The vision of a people of God faded, and was not to be revived in the shape that it held for Cromwell. Most of us probably look back on it with mixed feelings. But it was a heroic vision, and it embraced the humanity of man to man as well as the expectation of the millennium. Moreover its service demanded heroic virtues. 'A neutral spirit' would not do, Cromwell told his last parliament. 'Doubting, hesitating men, they are not fit for your work Do you think *these* men will rise to such a spiritual heat for the nation, that shall carry you to such a thing as this, that will meet with all the oppositions that the Devil and wicked men can make?' This was not a dictator's demand for blind obedience to his personal leadership; it was a call to a whole Parliament to rise to such a 'spiritual heat for the nation' as its great opportunities demanded. This is not a voice that we have often heard in English politics since Cromwell's day. But who can say it has lost all relevance for us now?

THE CROMWELL ASSOCIATION



CROMWELL'S DAY 1965

The Address given by
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at the
Annual Commemoration Service

I doubt whether any of you will need to be reminded why September 3rd is Cromwell's Day. It is not only the anniversary of his death; it is also the day on which he won two of his most resounding and decisive victories, at Dunbar and at Worcester.

But his hardest and (I think) his most heroic struggle really began when he sheathed his sword after his last battle in the field, at Worcester on this 3rd of September in the year 1651. We meet here in the shadow of the Palace of Westminster, and it was here he faced his next fight. He had to awaken a parliament grown old in intrigue to the measure of the ideals for which he had fought. About those ideals I want to talk today. They drove him, after long frustration, to expel the Rump of the Long Parliament. He next tried entrusting them to a Nominated Parliament, chosen by himself and his Council of Officers. But this failed him too, and ended by shifting its burden back on to his shoulders. At last he felt compelled to assume the headship of the state, which he could have had long before if he had wanted it.

Those of you who were here on Cromwell's Day last year heard that great Cromwellian Dr. C. V. Wedgwood remind you that September 3rd was also the date for which Cromwell summoned his first parliament as Lord Protector. With this parliament, and with its successor, he suffered bitter disillusionment. I would like to take up Dr. Wedgwood's theme where she left it, and suggest some reasons why he who believed so deeply in rule by parliament, in government by the nation's consent, failed to achieve it.

Back in 1647, when he had debated the very bases of politics with the Levellers in Putney Church, he had acknowledged 'that the foundation of supremacy is in the people, radically in them, and to be set down by them in their representatives'. But he did not mean by that that government must bow to the popular will in all questions of high policy. Indeed we can hardly talk of 'the popular will' at the point where Cromwell took up the reins of government; there were so many confused and conflicting interests. When he had been ruling for some years, he had to send for Lieutenant-General Ludlow, because that stiff-necked republican had been disseminating subversive propaganda in Ireland. 'What is it that you would have?', Cromwell asked him. 'That which we fought for', said Ludlow, 'that the nation might be governed by its own consent'. Cromwell replied, 'I am as much for a government by consent as any man; but where shall we find that consent? Amongst the Prelatical, Presbyterian, Independent, Anabaptist, or Levelling parties?'

This confusion of factions was one reason why he found it so hard to win the support of an elected parliament. Another reason was that he had come to power at the head of an army; and yet another, that in most Englishmen's eyes he had a king's blood on his hands. But these factors do not provide the full explanation. Nor shall we find it in a recent argument that Cromwell was no more than a glorified back-bencher, an innocent in the art of politics, who simply did not understand the techniques that were needed for managing the House of Commons.

It is true that he lacked the subtle skills of John Pym, who had been his master in parliamentary tactics. Nor did he anticipate the practices of Charles II's politicians, who built up a phalanx of king's friends in the House by distributing the spoils of patronage among them. Cromwell did not think in terms of jobs for the boys; he took the service of the state more seriously. But his failure to achieve co-operation with his parliaments was not just a matter of tactics. It arose from a clash of purpose and ideals.

You who care enough for Cromwell to honour his memory today will know that his most basic conviction was that he had fought the Lord's battles; that God had a purpose for England in all those victories that He had blessed; and that he, Cromwell, however unworthy, was the humble instrument of that divine purpose. It was a dangerous doctrine. It has turned lesser men into monsters.

But it convinced him that his first duty was to what he called 'the people of God', and the people of God were much smaller in numbers than the people of England.

God knows he was proud of the English nation as such — 'the best people in the world' he called them, in more than one speech. To *all* the people he owed protection and justice, the benefit of good laws, the peaceful pursuit of their callings and enjoyment of their property, their 'civil liberties as men' as well as their 'spiritual liberties as Christians'. But he was sure that there lay 'in the midst of this people, a people that are to God as the apple of his eye', 'a people that have a stamp upon them from God'.

The main reason he gave for expelling the Rump was 'that good was never intended to the people of God' and 'that the interest of His people was grown cheap and not laid to heart'. He charged its successor, the Nominated Parliament, to 'bear good fruits to the nation, to men as men, to the people of God'; but more often he put the priorities the other way round: 'the glory of God, the good of His people, the rights of the nation'.

By the people of God he meant no one sect or party. He spoke of 'the large comprehension of them, under the several forms of godliness in this nation'; 'those regenerated ones in the land, of several judgments'; all those, in fact, who had 'the root of the matter' in them. 'The root of the matter' was that experience of regeneration, of spiritual rebirth, which was the end of all Puritan teaching and preaching. Adam's sin had left all mankind corrupt, not only in will but in understanding; but the saving grace which God bestowed on the true believer began a work of renewal that would repair the clouded judgment as well as the depraved will of fallen man. I'm sure Cromwell shared the faith of his former friend Sir Henry Vane that God had begun a work of regeneration among His chosen people in England — a work that would spread from them to the whole nation, and to all the nations of the world, and would in the fullness of time bring all mankind back to the perfection in which God had created the first man. This is the sense in which Cromwell came to understand the prophecies of Christ's kingdom, the kingdom of the saints. 'Why should we be afraid', he asked, 'to say or think that this may be the door to usher in the things that God has promised, which have been prophesied of?'. This was why he called the English nation 'a people blessed by God . . . by reason of that immortal seed, . . . those regenerated ones in the land . . . who are all the flock of Christ'.

How then did he conceive his duty to the people of God, and how did it come between him and the people's representatives in parliament? First and foremost he owed them liberty of conscience, the right of all the saints to seek God by whatever way best answered to their convictions. So many speakers before me in this place have praised Cromwell for his steadfast efforts to secure religious and intellectual tolerance that I shall not dwell on this great endeavour of his. Nothing he did deserves more honour; yet few things roused greater dislike at the time, especially among the conservative-minded men of property who dominated his parliaments. Toleration was not enough, however; he thought that a Christian State must use its authority and resources to ensure that each parish had an able preaching minister. His government concerned itself for the schools, too, and he himself specially cared for the universities, which flourished under him as they were not to do again before the nineteenth century. He was the founder of the first of our new universities, which was most promisingly launched at Durham. Alas, it perished at the Restoration.

The cause of the people of God also included what he called 'a reformation of manners', and here many of us will find it harder to go along with him. The repressive Puritan laws against immorality, Sabbath-breaking, stage plays, swearing and the rest were mostly not of his making, but they had his support. Like all Puritans he was too ready to intrude public law into the sphere of private morals — an error from which our legislators have not yet entirely freed themselves. Some of his measures were wholly good: against duelling, for instance, and against the gamblers who made a living out of cheating the young gentry when they came to town. But when it comes to an ordinance for punishing the blasphemous oaths of porters and watermen, we may blink a little — and imagine Mr. Wilson framing a bill to moderate the language of dockers.